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## Populist Radical-Right Attitudes, Political Involvement and Selective Information Consumption: Who Tunes Out and Who Prefers Attitude-Consonant Information

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand how populist radical-right (PRR) attitudes and political involvement relate to individuals' political information consumption and selective exposure to ideological content. The study approaches political information selection as a two-step phenomenon: first, individuals use different amounts of political information, and second, they rely on attitude-consonant information to different degrees. Results from a combination of survey measures, implicit association tests and automated text analysis of large-scale online tracking data collected in Germany and Switzerland in 2020 showed that first, political information consumption was related to political involvement but also to PRR attitudes—in different ways—in both countries. Second, our analyses revealed country variations regarding attitude-consonant online PRR exposure. Third, implicit PRR attitudes were not relevant in explaining the use of PRR content online. We discuss the relevance of moving beyond analyses of traditional news toward the breadth of political information consumption, country contexts, and naturalistic research designs.

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Populist radical-right (PRR) parties have become electorally successful and seem to divide societies along the lines of a new cultural cleavage running between cosmopolitan liberals and populist right citizens (Kriesi, 2010). What unites radical-right populists is their support for nativist, authoritarian and populist ideas (Mudde, 2007; for citizens, see; Maier et al., 2023; Dunn, 2015; Lubbers & Coenders, 2017; Rooduijn, 2014; Rothmund et al., 2020). In this paper, we seek to understand whether this specific mind-set, in combination with political involvement, relates to citizens' political information consumption in general and selective exposure to PRR political contents in particular.

Evidence for selective exposure has so far mainly been collected through surveys and experiments. However, by combining surveys and web tracking, we seek to offer evidence in a naturalistic setting in which people select from the abundance of available alternatives including long-tail consumption patterns. Thus far, the few existing tracking studies concerned with selective exposure (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016; Guess, 2021; Stier et al., 2020) study information selectivity primarily on the source level. Sources are classified as either political or nonpolitical and/or mainstream versus ideological (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016; Guess, 2021)—often not even at the outlet level but at the level of media types (e.g., Stier et al., 2020). In this paper, we study selectivity at the content level.

Beyond studying information selectivity in a real-world setting and at the content level, we seek to advance the state of research from two additional perspectives. First, in today's multi-channel information environment, selectivity has a broader meaning than just the preference for attitude-consonant over attitude-dissonant political information. Given the abundant nonpolitical content and entertainment options, users might also choose to disregard political information (e.g., Arceneaux et al., 2013). Consequently, we underscore the need to study political information selectivity as a two-step phenomenon. In a first step people select into accessing certain kinds of political information or not accessing that content at all. In the second step they select attitude-consonant (or dissonant) information (see Arceneaux et al., 2013; Schulz et al., 2018).

Second, we broaden the research on selective exposure by considering the complexity of relevant attitudes. We study citizens' ideology in combination with factors that can be summarized as political involvement (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2013). We argue that PRR attitudes and political involvement interplay with political information selectivity. Furthermore, we test the role of implicit, non-intentional, often unconscious attitudes for information behavior in addition to the established explicit attitudes. Here, we assume that implicit attitudes might be additional relevant predictors since PRR attitudes are still socially sensitive in Western European societies and

suppression effects might hinder them from showing up in self-reported explicit attitudes.

Based on these research desiderata, we ask: Are PRR attitudes and political involvement related to citizens' two-step political information selection? To answer this research question, we combine two surveys in Germany and the German-speaking regions of Switzerland with a follow-up web tracking study in 2020.

### ***The two-step process of political information selection***

Political information selection is usually defined as ideologically-driven media consumption leading to motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). It is based on the idea that people prefer to expose themselves to political information that fits their preexisting attitudes to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The most stringent evidence for ideological selectivity stems from experiments that make people choose from consonant or dissonant political information. However, these experiments overestimate the strength of ideological selectivity because most of them fail to include entertainment options; if included, such options attract many people (Arceneaux et al., 2013). This strand of research becomes all the more important in an age of high-choice media environments, in which people must often make decisions about which content to select due to the abundance of choices (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert et al., 2010). Analytically, selectivity contains two processes: a process of selecting political information at all and then, if politics has been chosen, a process of ideological selectivity. For both of these processes, audience predispositions are relevant (Prior, 2005; Strömbäck et al., 2013): political involvement seems to drive political exposure whereas ideological attitudes are responsible for ideological selectivity. To our knowledge existing studies rarely look at both processes simultaneously and fail to ask the question whether the predispositions relevant for one of these selection processes also influence the other type of selection. It is this gap that our current research addresses.

### ***Selecting political information: The relationships between political involvement, PRR attitudes and political information use***

In high-choice information environments, individual political involvement becomes more relevant for media exposure while at the same time the role of information routines decreases (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2013). Consequently, research has shown that political involvement (so far often measured as political interest) is not only a core predictor of political information consumption, but has even increased in relevance over the last decades (e.g., Prior, 2005; Strömbäck et al., 2013).

Psychological involvement in politics can be conceptualized as a broad set of behaviors and attitudes that reflect the centrality of politics to a person's self-concept (Bromme & Rothmund, 2021), such as political interest, but also internal political efficacy, political participation propensity, or the tendency to discuss politics with friends (for other examples of this approach see Schatz et al., 1999; Weatherford, 1991). Accordingly, political involvement has been modeled as a higher-order factor of these more specific constructs (Bromme & Rothmund, 2021; Weatherford, 1991).

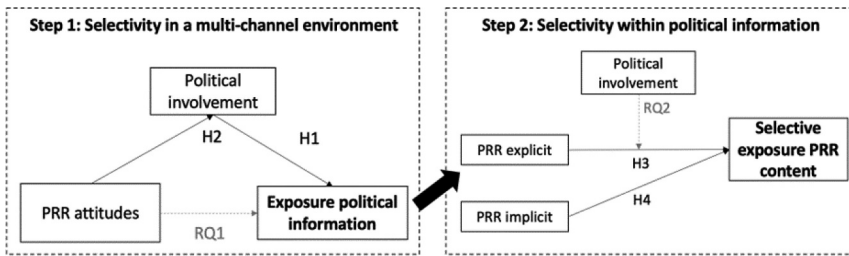
Previous research on political information consumption has mainly focused on political interest (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2013). However, other aspects of political involvement may predispose a person to consume political information. For example, exposure to complex political news should be more appealing and less aversive for people who feel that they are able to understand politics or who feel more political efficacy. We therefore hypothesize that political involvement, as a broad higher-order factor, predicts exposure to political information. Using higher-order political involvement as a predictor provides two advantages: By regarding several sub-dimensions, it is more comprehensive than including political interest alone; meanwhile, it is also more parsimonious than including several overlapping predictors—similar to the common practice of using a single left-right-dimension rather than several distinct issue-preferences. Therefore, our baseline hypothesis is:

**H1:** Political involvement is positively associated with individuals' exposure to political information.

Whether ideology—and more specifically populist radical-right attitudes—also directly influence political information consumption is less clear. Theoretically, one might assume that the strong anti-establishment stance of PRR citizens might make them turn away from (mainstream) politics. Yet, empirically, the evidence is inconclusive: On the one hand, the anti-establishment dimension of populism was found to positively relate to entertainment preferences (Hameleers et al., 2017). Populist attitudes were more prevalent among news avoiders than among those interested in news and politics (Spruyt et al., 2016). On the other hand, Schulz (2018) found that populist citizens were more inclined to consume news, especially on TV, than non-populists (see also Stier et al., 2020). In addition to this inconclusive evidence on populist attitudes, we lack—to our knowledge—any systematic evidence regarding populist radical-right attitudes, which leads to the first research question:

**RQ1:** Do PRR attitudes directly relate to political information use?

See [Figure 1](#) for a visual summary of all research questions and hypotheses.



**Figure 1.** Summary of the theoretical model.

Yet, there might also be an indirect effect of ideology on political information use: PRR attitudes may be related to political involvement, which then drives political information consumption. Theoretically, there are two possible paths for such a mediation—with contradictory outcomes: First, one might assume that citizens with stronger PRR attitudes due to their attitude strength might be more politically involved and thus show higher information exposure. Initial support for this idea comes from studies that show that PRR citizens closely observe unliked elites and are therefore more interested in politics (Hambauer & Mays, 2018; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2019). Second, a counter-hypothesis could be that PRR citizens are less politically interested and thus consume less political information. Their strong rejection of mainstream elites and frustration with a multitude of political issues might make them disconnect from politics. Some studies also empirically support this picture: PRR people are less interested in politics (Dunn, 2015; Mudde, 2004), lack the feeling of political efficacy (Spruyt et al., 2016) and are alienated from politics (Schulz, 2018). Both perspectives, even if they predict contradictory outcomes, lay out an indirect effect of PRR attitudes on political information consumption. We thus hypothesize:

**H2:** The effect of PRR attitudes on individuals’ exposure to political information is mediated by political involvement.

### ***Selecting consonant versus dissonant political information: The relationship between PRR attitudes, political involvement and attitude-consonant information consumption***

Ideological selectivity refers to the fact that people seem to prefer attitude-consonant information (e.g., Guess, 2021; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Stroud, 2010, 2011), as they seek to avoid cognitive dissonance (e.g., Festinger, 1957). This psychological mechanism is rooted in the idea that cognitive dissonance causes stress. Following Taber and Lodge (2006), we assume that citizens’ prior attitudes influence not only how they evaluate

arguments, but also how they select new information. In an era of high choice information systems, this selection process becomes all the more important: people select into confirming over disconfirming information, which leads to a confirmation bias.

Based on experimental research and survey studies, we know partisans are especially likely to engage in selective exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Mothes & Ohme, 2019; Taber & Lodge, 2006), with some evidence suggesting that right-leaning citizens show more opinion-confirming information consumption than liberals (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Vraga, 2015). Prior studies connect this confirmation bias to specific media outlets that are assumed to cater to the prior beliefs of right-wingers: Populist attitudes connect to a preference for tabloids, commercial TV and Facebook (Schulz, 2018; Stier et al., 2020),<sup>1</sup> anti-immigrant attitudes relate to tabloids (Diehl et al., 2021) and alternative right-wing media (Schulze, 2020). Whereas support for a PRR party is related to stronger social media use (Schumann et al., 2019), hyper-partisan media (Stier et al., 2020) and alternative media (Müller & Schulz, 2021). Based on these findings, we propose studying ideological selectivity in naturalistic settings, yet not on the source but on the content level. This leads to our third hypothesis:

**H3:** PRR attitudes are positively associated with the degree of selective exposure to PRR content.

However, research has also shown that citizens with PRR attitudes also use mainstream content instead of a strictly attitude-consonant information diet. Such behavior can be a conscious step for highly involved PRR citizens: They either observe the perceived enemy and collect information about these political opponents (Schulz, 2018; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003) or they search for non-consonant arguments and classify them as less compelling than one's own views, i.e., counter-arguing to reduce dissonance (e.g., Bolsen et al., 2014; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Both strategies, observing the political opponent and counter-arguing, require high political involvement. In contrast, less-involved citizens might also incidentally expose themselves to non-consonant content. Based on these contradictory considerations of how political involvement and PRR ideology might interact in shaping ideological selectivity, we ask our second RQ:

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<sup>1</sup>However, Hameleers et al. (2017) did not find strong support for the tabloidization of populists' media diets.

**RQ 2:** Does political involvement moderate the strength of the relationship between populist radical-right attitudes and the degree of selective exposure to PRR content?

### ***Explicit and implicit PRR attitudes and selective online information behavior***

Research on selective online information behavior so far has relied on explicit, self-reported attitudes as predictors. Yet, during the past 25 years, social and cognitive psychology have developed the so-called two-process models (for an overview, see Smith & DeCoster, 2000) illustrating that individuals' attitudinal systems include an explicit but also an implicit component, often referred to as implicit attitudes. According to these models,

attitudes are represented, on the one hand, as propositional evaluations of objects that are deliberately accessible through self-reflection (explicit attitudes), and, on the other hand, as automatic associations of objects and valences that are not intentionally formed and often unconscious. (implicit attitudes). (Maier et al., 2015; for overviews, see e.g., p. 371; Greenwald et al., 2009; Maier et al., 2022)

On the explicit route, individuals evaluate any object (e.g., a political party) based on their preexisting values and beliefs and form an explicit attitude. This explicit attitude is relevant for deliberate decision making (e.g., voting) and can be reported in a survey, because it is accessible through introspection. On the implicit route, however, individuals develop automatic associations with objects, which are especially relevant for impulsive reactions toward an object (e.g., meeting foreigners on the street). Implicit attitudes are not accessible through introspection and must therefore be measured by indirect tests, as described below.

Often, a person's explicit and implicit attitudes are consistent. However, sometimes they differ systematically—making it necessary to distinguish between both routes. In our study, implicit attitudes may be relevant when studying online information exposure, as explicit attitudes can be subject to distortion by social desirability perceptions in two ways: On the one hand, citizens may correct their self-reported deliberate (i.e., explicit) attitudes according to their preferred self-representation to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), a mechanism of internal suppression. PRR attitudes might well be sensitive in this regard, as individuals might want to perceive themselves as more egalitarian (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017), unprejudiced (Arendt, 2013) and benevolent toward others (Feldman, 2003) than PRR ideology would suggest. On the other hand, it is assumed that people also react to the social acceptance of their attitudes within their environment (external suppression). It has been argued that nativist and authoritarian attitudes are especially subject to



social (un-) desirability perceptions in Western European societies (Maier et al., 2023). Both suppression effects should be effective on the explicit but not on the implicit attitude level (e.g., Burdein et al., 2006; Gawronski & De Houwer, 2014; for implicit attitudes related to nativism, see; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017).

Implicit PRR attitudes should be less sensitive to such bias and therefore explicit and implicit PRR attitudes seem relevant when analyzing information behavior (for first attempts to measure implicit PRR attitudes, see Arendt et al., 2015; Bos et al., 2018; Maier et al., 2022, 2023). In a study that used explicit and implicit nationalist and EU-related attitudes as predictors of EU-skeptical information behavior, Maier et al. (2015) showed that implicit nationalist attitudes had a robust effect on participants' EU-related information behavior. Beyond, political online information behavior itself might be a relatively less deliberate process than other forms of political behavior such as voting behavior, so that immediate, impulsive behavior should be even more relevant, which is rooted primarily in implicit attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, to fully understand the relevance of PRR attitudes for political online information behavior, we suggest including implicit and explicit attitude components in our theoretical model. To do so, we test the incremental effect of implicit PRR attitudes on information behavior after controlling for the explicit self-reported PRR attitudes

**H4:** Implicit PRR attitudes are positively related to the degree of selective exposure to PRR content online, above and beyond explicit PRR attitudes.

## Method

### *Research design*

We studied the relationship between PRR attitudes, political involvement and political information exposure of German and German-speaking Swiss

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<sup>2</sup>The measurement of implicit attitudes requires so-called indirect tests, e.g., the Implicit Association Test [IAT] by Greenwald et al. (1998). As these indirect tests are very time-consuming and have to be assessed for each attitudinal construct separately in addition to the respective survey items, it has been debated vividly whether the additional insights they provide are worth the increased effort (e.g., Friese et al., 2016; Jost, 2019). The current state of the discussion suggests that implicit attitudes should be especially promising in the context of less controlled and more impulsive forms of behavior, e.g., interpersonal interaction but also online information search—and as explained above, in domains sensitive to perceptions of social desirability concerns (for summaries, see Bablok et al., 2020; Ksiazkiewicz & Hedrick, 2013).

citizens. We chose those two populations because they speak the same language, however, the two countries differ greatly regarding context variables relevant for our study. This research design eases the application of automated text analysis approaches (with some considerations related to differences between standard German and Swiss German, outlined in the limitations section), but also allows us to test whether our relatively general expectations about political information exposure and the role of ideology and involvement hold despite structural and cultural differences between these countries. Switzerland is a direct democracy, which means that populist radical-right ideas can easily be accessed through referenda. In addition, Switzerland has a strong PRR party, the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), which has gained the largest vote share of all parties in recent elections and which has been part of the consensus government in recent decades. This openness toward PRR ideas is also reflected in the media landscape: There are strong financial and structural connections of the SVP in parts of the newspaper system—which is most strongly visible in the populist radical-right weekly “Weltwoche.” Germany, partially due to its Nazi past, is a system where it is more challenging to openly discuss PRR ideas. Institutionally, Germany has a representative political system with strong hurdles for newcomers to actually enter the parliament. Germany’s populist radical-right party, the “Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)” did not succeed in entering the national parliament until 2017, but with limited vote shares (at maximum 12.6%) and with no chance of government participation. The limited role of PRR ideas in Germany becomes also visible in the media landscape: there is no printed national newspaper with a clear populist radical-right stance.

### **Research setting**

After exposing citizens to a survey that captures their PRR attitudes, political involvement and (offline) media consumption habits at the beginning of March 2020, we asked them to participate in an online tracking study from mid-March until the end of May 2020 that captured the actual content of participants’ (desktop-based) online media diets. We then employed automated textual content analysis to detect political and PRR content. For our analyses regarding exposure to political information (Step 1), we combined survey and tracking data, considering all potential sources of political information. As the analyses regarding selective exposure to PRR content require measuring media content (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016), only the tracked online information behavior can be considered for Step 2. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau on November 8, 2019.

### **Data collection**

Employing an online panel-based approach, data<sup>3</sup> were collected by the market research firm DemoSCOPE from March to May 2020. We recruited a sample of 18- to 75-year-olds from Germany and the German-speaking regions of Switzerland following population parameters regarding gender and age (interlocked), education, and the region of residence (West vs. East) for those who lived in Germany. For a full description, see Appendix A1 in the online supplemental materials. After answering basic demographic questions and giving their consent, participants started the IAT block, which was accessed via a third-party built-in procedure created by Project Implicit (<https://www.projectimplicit.net/>). Participants were automatically redirected to the IAT interface, where they completed the IAT procedures and their reaction times were recorded, as summarized in the measures section of this article. After this block was completed, participants were redirected back to the survey. Finally, upon finishing the survey participants received a link to download and install the plugin for Chrome or Firefox. The plugin, named WebTrack, was designed within the current project and captured all HTML of web content appearing in the browser for which the extension was installed (for details, see Christner et al., 2022). The content (3,531,606 documents in total) was then sent to a remote server, where data was encrypted and stored. By the end of the period (March 17 to May 26, 2020), 574 (Germany, DE) and 575 (Switzerland, CH) participants had successfully registered web tracking activity for at least two days (DE,  $M = 54.46$  days,  $SD = 12.02$ ; CH,  $M = 55.26$  days,  $SD = 8.88$ ). This tracking sample had a significantly greater representation of older participants in Germany and younger participants in Switzerland when compared to the population parameters. The tracking sample also overrepresented male and highly educated participants in both countries. See Appendix A2 in the online supplemental materials for a detailed comparison between sample statistics and population parameters.

### **Classification of tracking data**

For the construction of our dependent variables, we used two steps of automated content analysis for textual data collected during the tracking period:

1. To identify political content, we designed a political dictionary for German language content as shown in Appendix A3 in the online supplemental materials. The dictionary was based on the German

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<sup>3</sup>Data and syntax available for download at [https://osf.io/fx4qg/?view\\_only=5a8f3cbaf44040339962f81bb3683eaa](https://osf.io/fx4qg/?view_only=5a8f3cbaf44040339962f81bb3683eaa)

codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), listing words related to common political topics (e.g., economy) and enhanced with terms on political topics that were less covered by CAP (e.g., elections), as well as names of political actors from Germany and Switzerland (parliamentarians and governing ministers) and the G20 and European Union countries (top political figures, e.g., presidents/prime ministers).

The dictionary was then tested on two validation datasets. See Appendix A5 in the online supplemental materials for information on the preparation of these datasets and validation results. The use of two validation sets was attributed to the high variety of platforms from which tracking data were captured. To minimize potential biases of relying on a single validation dataset, we decided to do an additional validation, which involved testing the performance both on the random sample of tracking data and on common sources of political information. Furthermore, due to the relatively small amount of political compared to nonpolitical content, we were concerned that a random sample of tracking data may have too little political content, which may again result in bias in terms of validation.

To determine the optimal threshold for political terms, we used iterative testing. We calculated the ratio of terms from the political dictionary to all terms per document in the two validation sets and then tested the resulting ratios as possible thresholds for detecting political content. The f1 scores revealed that a threshold of 25% worked best. Following the comparison of different modes of pre-processing (e.g., stemming, lemmatization, stop word removal), we opted for stemming (using snowball stemmer from NLTK Python library) together with the selectolax HTML parser to extract text from tracked HTML content. The decision was based on the computational time required to process the entire tracking sample per mode of pre-processing and the impact of specific modes of pre-processing on dictionary performance. Because of the classifier's low performance on extremely short texts, documents with less than 1,000 characters were filtered out of the tracking dataset before the classifier was applied. The manual examination of these short documents showed that they did not contain meaningful information and usually consisted of error messages (e.g., about the page not loading). As a result, out of 2,084,400 German language documents longer than 1,000 characters, 249,323 (12%) were coded as political.

2. To detect PRR content, we relied on an ensemble of a linear regression-based model (LR) and a bidirectional encoder representation from transformers (BERT) model. In the case of BERT, we used the pre-trained model for the German language from Hugging Face (<https://huggingface.co/bert-base-german-cased>) which was then fine-tuned for the PRR detection task. Based on the comparison of performance using different modes of pre-processing, we opted to use lemmatization for the LR model and no pre-processing for the BERT model. The choice of the ensemble model was based on a comparison

of the performance of individual and ensemble models (for more information, see Appendix A4 in the online supplemental materials). Because of the high complexity of the task, we first proceeded with the classification at the level of sentences and then scaled the sentence level classification to the document level due to the documents being our main unit of analysis. To train the models, we selected a structured random sample of 757 documents from our tracking data, which had been classified as political in the previous step. To account for the expected underrepresentation of PRR content, we over-sampled documents obtained from right-wing websites in Germany and Switzerland. Then, we automatically extracted sentences from the documents, resulting in 27,430 sentences, which were subsequently manually coded to detect the presence of nativism, populism and authoritarianism (treated as binary variables; see Appendix A4 in the online supplemental materials for more information). The final step in measuring the exposure to PRR content was to scale the classification from the sentence level to the document level. To do so, we extracted two random samples ( $n = 500$  each) of documents from the tracking data: one obtained from legacy media and the other from right-wing media. We then calculated the average ratio of PRR sentences to non-PRR sentences in each sample. The results demonstrated a major difference between the proportion of PRR to non-PRR sentences for legacy media and right-wing outlets. Consequently, we used the values from the third quartile of right-wing websites as thresholds for the proportion of PRR sentences to non-PRR sentences, which should be present in the document for it to be classified as PRR (these Q3 values were 0.28 for LR and 0.15 for BERT). The resulting classification of 249,323 political documents (only political documents were treated as potentially holding PRR content) resulted in 1,028 documents<sup>4</sup> (0.41%) classified as PRR.

## Measures

### Dependent variables

For our analyses regarding the first step of selectivity, we measured the degree of exposure to political information as the frequency with which an individual was exposed to political information (1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*), either online or offline. We computed this measure using a combination of survey data for print, TV and radio together with tracking data for all online activities. First, the survey measure asked participants to rate the frequency with which they used newspapers or magazines, public service and private TV, public service and private radio for political information. We then adapted the tracking data to the survey scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *several times/month*, 4 = *several times/week*, 5 = *daily*) by calculating, for each participant, the

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<sup>4</sup>142 documents from legacy media sites, 238 from right-wing outlets.

ratio between the number of days in which they registered at least one visit to a site identified as political and the total number of potential active days (i.e., days registering at least one visit from the first day they used the tracker to the end of the tracking period). This yielded a measure from 0 to 1, which we then adapted to the survey frequency measures by establishing cutoffs.<sup>5</sup> The cutoffs were the following: A participant showing political activity for a minimum of five days a week would register *daily consumption*; from two to five days a week, the equivalent to *several times a week*; from one to two days a week, *several times a month*; from less than once a week to showing any exposure, *rarely*; finally, the value *never* was assigned to those having no political exposure. For example, a participant with a total tracking period of 9 weeks, who registered political activity (i.e., at least one visit to pages identified as political) twice a week, would have had a political activity ratio of  $9 \times 2 = 18$ ;  $18/63 = .286$ . Hence, we established that ratios of .28 or higher would denote the several times/week frequency (value 4 in the survey measure). We always used the highest usage frequencies in summarizing all activities; for example, if someone never used TV but read the newspaper daily, they were exposed to political information daily. Detailed descriptive statistics are provided for all variables in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials.

For the analyses regarding the second step of selectivity, only tracking data can be used, as the survey data do not include information on ideological cues included in participants' information diets. Exposure to PRR information was computed as the individual count of visits registered throughout the tracking period to pages identified as containing PRR content (i.e., count of documents classified as PRR; shown in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials).

### **Independent variables**

Explicit and implicit PRR attitudes: Populism, nativism, and authoritarianism form three distinct but correlated subdimensions of the latent construct PRR attitudes (see e.g., Maier et al., 2023; Rooduijn, 2014), which we measure in the explicit and implicit realms.

To measure explicit populist attitudes, we used the 9-item populism scale by Schulz et al. (2018), with the three subdimensions (1) anti-establishment attitudes, (2) demand for popular sovereignty and (3) belief in the homogeneous virtuousness of the people (for detailed descriptive statistics and item wordings for all three PRR explicit subscales, see Appendix A7 in the online supplemental materials). To assess explicit nativism, we use a short

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<sup>5</sup>We followed the idea of studying consumption patterns on a continuum (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016) instead of developing binary distinctions of information avoiders vs. seekers and opinion-consonant vs.-dissonant users.

version of the Anti-Immigrant Attitudes scale by Akkerman et al. (2017), which includes items like “Immigrants are a threat to cultural life in our country.” Authoritarianism is measured using four items of the child-rearing values (CRV) measure by Feldman and Stenner (1997), (e.g., preference for respect for elders vs. independence). The mean scores for populism, nativism and authoritarianism are aggregated into one PRR scale as shown in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials.

To operationalize PRR attitudes in the implicit realm, we used IATs (Greenwald et al., 2003) with prototypical populist, nativist and authoritarian stimuli. IATs are designed to reveal respondents’ automatic associations of dichotomous target categories (e.g., for the populism-IAT: politicians vs. citizens) with an attribute (negative vs. positive), based on their reaction times in a sorting task with speed instructions. Specifically, participants had to sort target stimuli appearing in the middle of their computer screen to either a concordant attribute (politicians—negative; citizens—positive) in one block of trials or to a discordant attribute (politicians—positive; citizens—negative) in another block of trials. The difference between the mean reaction times of concordant vs. discordant trials (which, after standardization across trials, is called *D*), can be interpreted to reflect the strength of automatic association between the stimuli and their concordant attributes (Greenwald et al., 2003). The populism-IAT was developed and validated in a pilot study of this project (Maier et al., 2022), while the nativism- and authoritarianism-IAT were newly developed. For the nativism-IAT, we used fellow citizens and migrants as target categories; the authoritarianism-IAT referred to conformity versus autonomy values. All three IATs were built to mirror the corresponding direct measures in the survey as closely as possible while still using easy-to-grasp words (for a detailed description of the procedure and word lists, see Appendix A8). We applied the standard seven-block procedure described by Greenwald et al. (1998) and calculated the strength of the implicit association (*D* score) using Greenwald et al. (2003) improved IAT-scoring algorithm. All *D* scores ranged from  $-2$  to  $+2$ . For example, in the populism-IAT, positive values indicate a stronger automatic association of citizens with positive attributes, while negative values indicate a stronger automatic association of politicians with positive attributes. The final measure of implicit PRR attitudes was computed as the average of the three *D* scores. Appendix A7 in the online supplemental materials provides a detailed descriptive statistics and reliabilities of each individual IAT.

**Political Involvement:** Following the model of General Political Involvement (Bromme & Rothmund, 2021), we conceptualize political involvement as higher-order motivational construct comprising political interest, frequency of voting in elections, internal efficacy, political information efficacy and frequency of political discussion with others. Due to space

restrictions, each sub-dimension was measured with a single item on a 5-point scale as shown in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials. This approach ensures capturing the overarching tendency of political involvement in its full breadth, at the cost of measurement accuracy regarding each sub-dimension on its own (see the bandwidth-fidelity trade-off; Cronbach, 1960).

### **Controls**

Participants' gender, age and education were used as demographic controls in the analyses. Additional details are available in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials.

### **Strategy of analysis**

Analyses were performed using SPSS (IBM Corporation). Linear regression<sup>6</sup> models were run separately for each country in the first step of selectivity (i.e., political exposure). For the second step (i.e., PRR exposure), negative binomial regressions with robust standard errors<sup>7</sup> and estimated dispersion parameters were chosen as the best approach to model the over-dispersed rates of PRR exposure.<sup>8</sup> Since the total number of political visits was unique for each user and a necessary basis for PRR exposure, we added an offset of  $\ln$  (# political visits) to the negative binomial model.<sup>9</sup> Mediations were tested using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for mediation analysis (Hayes, 2017). The variables were centered around the mean in the models containing interaction terms. Finally, the models were run using as many complete cases as possible for the complete set of variables used at each step of selective exposure (step 1:  $N_{DE} = 574$ ,  $N_{CH} = 575$ ; step 2:  $N_{DE} = 556$ ;  $N_{CH} = 564$ ). Step 2 models excluded all participants who had not consumed any political information.

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<sup>6</sup>Given the skewed nature of the DV, step 1 models were also tested using ordinal logistic regression. The results remained constant.

<sup>7</sup>SPSS robust estimator is the Huber/White/sandwich estimator. It provides a "corrected" model-based estimate of the covariance that is robust to certain model misspecifications, particularly heteroskedasticity for cross-sectional data.

<sup>8</sup>Models displayed best fit over Poisson and negative binomial with default (fixed) dispersion parameter. AIC and BIC comparisons are provided in Appendix A9 in the online supplemental materials.

<sup>9</sup>This strategy was judged more appropriate than employing beta regressions to model PRR-to-total-political ratios, given that the individual counts of PRR visits are not based on a fixed volume of total political exposure for all individuals; rather, the total count of political visits also varies across individuals.



## Results

### *Selecting political information*

At the descriptive level, exposure to political information was unevenly distributed in the samples. While self-reported measures of frequency of media use for political information averaged relatively high in both countries ( $M_{DE} = 4.44$ ;  $M_{CH} = 4.31$ ), participants' online (tracked) diets displayed a pattern of exposure whereby most users consumed political information occasionally (5–15% of their total visits; average frequencies between several times a month and several times a week), whereas a few individuals did so regularly and comprised the bulk of the total volume of political visits. Full descriptive statistics are available in Appendix A6 in the online supplemental materials. A relatively small portion of participants displayed little to no political exposure (12.4% of participants with < 10 visits; 2.5% with zero visits), suggesting that few completely tuned out of politics during the tracking period.

The results for the first step of (political) information selectivity are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 2. First, political involvement showed a highly significant positive association with the degree of exposure to political information in Germany and Switzerland, supporting H1. Holding all other variables in Model 1 constant, a unit increase in the scale of political involvement was associated with an increase of 0.18 in the scale of frequency of exposure to political information in Germany and 0.14 in Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> Concerning RQ1, PRR attitudes showed a negative relationship with political information exposure in Switzerland, whereas no relationship was observed in Germany as shown in Table 1, Model 2. Furthermore, Model 3 showed that in Germany, a positive effect of PRR attitudes on political information exposure appeared when controlling for political involvement. However, as the added variance explained by PRR attitudes above political involvement was almost negligible, we interpret this finding cautiously.

Next, we tested the interrelation between PRR attitudes and political involvement in the context of political information usage in greater detail with the mediation model as shown in Figure 2. The results showed that political involvement mediated the effect of PRR attitudes both in Switzerland and in Germany (H2): Individuals with stronger PRR attitudes

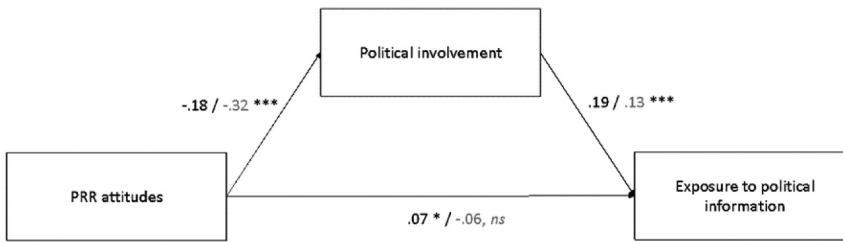
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<sup>10</sup>This set of results was replicated with additional models predicting exposure to political information using 1) only the self-reported (i.e., survey based) political information usage and 2) the count of visits to online political sites separately, see models in Appendix A10 in the online supplemental materials. Overall, the findings remained robust.

**Table 1.** Linear regression models predicting frequency of exposure to political information (self-report + online tracking).

	DE, Model 1		CH, Model 1		DE, Model 2		CH, Model 2		DE, Model 3		CH, Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender (ref. female)	0.10	0.05*	0.09	0.05	0.19	0.05***	0.14	0.05***	0.10	0.05*	0.10	0.05†
Age	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00**	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***
Education	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Political involvement	0.18	0.03***	0.14	0.04***	0.04	0.04**	-0.10	0.04*	0.19	0.03***	0.13	0.04***
PRR attitudes					0.04	0.04			0.07	0.04*	-0.06	0.05
Intercept	3.75	0.18***	3.57	0.17***	4.21	0.19***	4.35	0.22***	3.44	0.23***	3.83	0.27***
F	22.16***		24.90***		14.64***		21.93***		18.66***		20.25***	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.13		0.14		0.09		0.13		0.13		0.14	

Sig. levels \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .1$   
 N DE = 574; N CH = 575



DE: Model  $F(5,569) = 18.660, p < .001; R^2 = .14; N = 574$   
 CH: Model  $F(5,569) = 20.253, p < .001; R^2 = .15; N = 575$

**Figure 2.** Mediation model for exposure to political information (step 1).

displayed lower levels of political involvement ( $B_{CH} = -.32, B_{DE} = -.18, p < .001$ ) and in turn, this lack of involvement was accompanied by less exposure to political information ( $B_{CH} = .13, B_{DE} = .19, p < .001$ ; see Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> In Germany, the main path from PRR attitudes to political exposure remained significant, while in Switzerland it did not.

### Selecting consonant versus dissonant content

Asymmetries in the distribution of exposure to PRR information were more pronounced than those displayed by political information usage. The average ratio of visits to pages identified as PRR out of total political visits was .02 for Swiss participants and .04 for German participants. Here, too, a few individuals concentrated the highest number of visits, while the bulk of participants were exposed to either no PRR content or exposed very rarely. For the most avid consumers, PRR exposure accounted for up to 31% of total online political information consumption in Germany and about 18% in Switzerland as shown in Appendix A4 in the online supplemental materials.

The results for the second step of selectivity are summarized in Table 2. Explicit PRR attitudes were positively associated with individuals' degree of exposure to PRR content in Germany. Holding everything else constant, every unit increase in PRR attitude scores was associated with an expected increase of 39% in the rate of PRR exposure ( $exp [0.33]$ ). However, explicit PRR attitudes were not significantly related to exposure to PRR content

<sup>11</sup>A test of the inverse mechanism (political involvement > PRR > political information exposure) did not reveal statistically significant results for the Swiss data, while in Germany, the path from the mediator (PRR) to the DV (exposure to political information) remained significant (see Appendix A11 in the online supplemental materials).

**Table 2.** Negative binomial regression models predicting rate of exposure to PRR information (online tracking).

	Model 1, DE		Model 1, CH		Model 2, DE		Model 2, CH		Model 3, DE		Model 3, CH	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender (ref. female)	0.18	0.21	0.12	0.30	0.18	0.22	0.12	0.30	0.18	0.21	0.12	0.30
Age	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Education	-0.07	0.04	-0.04	0.05	-0.07	0.04	-0.04	0.05	-0.07	0.04	-0.04	0.05
Political involvement	0.49	0.14***	0.63	0.18***	0.49	0.14***	0.63	0.18***	0.48	0.14***	0.62	0.18***
PRR explicit	0.33	0.15*	-0.15	0.25	0.33	0.16*	-0.15	0.24	0.35	0.16*	-0.13	0.24
Pol invol. * PRR expl.					-0.01	0.18	0.01	0.21				
PRR implicit									-0.17	0.40	-0.16	0.50
Intercept	-8.27	0.97***	-7.23	1.18***	-5.47	0.62***	-5.61	0.52***	-8.27	0.97***	-7.25	1.17***
Dispersion parameter	2.51	0.37	3.15	0.63	2.51	0.37	3.15	0.63	2.50	0.37	3.14	0.63
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square (a)	21.19	df = 5***	15.35	df = 5**	21.19	df = 6**	15.36	df = 6*	21.39	df = 6**	15.42	df = 6*
Log Likelihood	1023.96		665.10		1025.95		667.10		1025.76		667.03	
AIC	1054.20		695.45		1060.52		701.78		1060.32		701.71	

Sig. levels \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

N DE = 556; N CH = 564

Notes: Variables mean-centered for models with interaction terms; model offset: natural log, total count political visits

(a) Compares the fitted model against the intercept-only model.

online in Switzerland.<sup>12</sup> Together, the results provide partial support for H3.

Next, while political involvement was positively associated with PRR exposure in both country samples, it did not moderate the strength of the relationship between explicit PRR attitudes and selective exposure to PRR content (RQ2).

Finally, H4 addressed the relationship between implicit PRR attitudes and PRR exposure. In the German and Swiss samples, implicit PRR attitudes were not found to relate to individuals' degree of exposure to PRR content above and beyond explicit PRR attitudes.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, H4 was rejected.<sup>14</sup>

## Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand different forms of selectivity in naturalistic settings. Unlike research relying on experimental and survey designs, our research design allowed participants to choose from the universe of online alternatives, and it allowed us to classify the content used as (non-)political and (non-)PRR. By doing so, we not only studied selectivity on the content level but also moved it beyond traditional news, considering all political information independent of where such information is published. We conclude with three major findings.

First, we find that political involvement affects selectivity in similar manners across both countries. Even in contexts with divergent cultural and structural systems, political involvement predicts exposure choices: Less involved citizens consume less information and are thus more likely to be left behind in an information environment that allows them to easily

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<sup>12</sup>These country differences led us to consider the possibility that ideological selectivity operated mostly (or even exclusively) at the high extreme of the PRR spectrum. We tested this possibility by running complementary models with a quadratic term of PRR, and separating the PRR variable into categorical groups to spot any extreme effects. Steps 1 and 2 model results mirror what we found in the models presented here.

<sup>13</sup>In an earlier draft, suppression was operationalized as the difference between implicit-explicit PRR attitudes. By subtracting the standardized explicit average score from the standardized implicit average score for each individual participant as shown in Appendix A6 in the supplemental online materials. Based upon reviewer feedback, we simplified the procedure by regressing the degree of selective exposure onto implicit PRR attitudes after controlling for explicit PRR attitudes. The original results do not differ from the results reported here.

<sup>14</sup>Results for the two steps were replicated with models using dummy education variables comparing low vs middle and low vs high education levels instead of measured linearly; coefficients differed only slightly as shown in see Appendix A12 in the online supplemental materials.

escape from accessing politics. However, involvement does not have a moderating effect in regards to ideological selectivity.

Second, we find stronger variation among our countries in regards to the role of PRR attitudes. Although in both Germany and Switzerland, PRR attitudes are related to less political involvement and, as a consequence, less political exposure, PRR attitudes yield different effects regarding ideological selectivity. On the one hand, PRR attitudes were positively associated with individuals' degree of exposure to PRR online content in Germany, although with a rather small effect size. On the other hand, there was no significant relationship in Switzerland.

Based on our findings, we hypothesize that the role of ideological predispositions for processes of selectivity is dependent on the context of a country. In societies like Switzerland that are open to reflect PRR ideas in the political and media systems and where PRR has already gained majority status, PRR citizens show no indications for ideological selectivity online. The lack of ideological online consumption might indicate that there is sufficient PRR content in the traditional (offline) media landscape. In countries like Germany that are less open to PRR ideas in the political and media systems and where PRR ideas are still in the minority, citizens who hold PRR attitudes tend to go online to get consonant information due to the lack of such information in the offline media world.

Third, our data reveal no relationship between implicit attitudes and ideological selectivity. This might imply that online information behavior is a more conscious act than we initially assumed. Another explanation is that the participants might have been more aware of the observation situation during our tracking study than we had expected. In addition, our tracking tool included a technical feature called private mode, which allowed participants to browse privately whenever they did not want their online behavior to be tracked. This function could have allowed them to hide any online contents they deemed socially undesirable.

As further limitations of our study, we have to acknowledge that we could only combine data on offline and online information usage in the first step of our analysis, in which we used survey data as a proxy for offline information usage in combination with online tracking data. For the analysis of selective exposure to PRR content (Step 2), we could only consider the online tracking data, which hinders us from detecting ideological selectivity in people's overall media diets. In addition, we only captured online information behavior on desktop devices (and here only as regards two browsers) but not on mobile devices. This is likely to limit the scope of our findings, since other browsers (e.g., Safari) and, even more, mobile internet use are increasingly important across demographic groups (e.g., Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2019). It is primarily for the younger people

who strongly rely on mobile devices (Newman et al., 2022) for whom we expect a substantial amount of missing data. As with all online tracking studies, we also must be aware of the reluctance of citizens to participate in studies that capture their behavioral data, which in our study was especially strong among women and specific education and age groups as shown in Appendix A2 in the online supplemental materials.

Another methodological limitation concerns the use of automated cross-platform text analysis for detecting political and PRR content. Especially in the case of PRR, such detection is difficult due to multiple challenges of operationalizing the concept. In the case of Switzerland, this task is further complicated by the use of dialects different from the standard German. Under these circumstances, it is important to note that the use of classifiers trained on standard German corpora (e.g., German BERT model) can result in worse performance for pages in Swiss German dialects. At the same time, the large amount of Germanophone web content in Switzerland is produced in standard German due to dialects being used primarily in private communication. In the case of tracking data, such content will likely be encountered in private messages (e.g., e-mails or messages) which were excluded from tracking to safeguard the privacy of participants.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic context might have contributed to making it harder to detect online ideological selectivity. Due to the pandemic, traditional PRR positions have changed regarding the meaning of authoritarianism—one of the core constituents of PRR attitudes. Previously, citizens with PRR attitudes were regarded as authoritarian, supporting strong leaders, an ordered society and social conformity. However, during the pandemic PRR actors presented positions opposing authorities and strict measures, thus potentially weakening the relation between our (classic) attitudinal measures (collected before the first lockdown) and the actual positions of PRR actors included in the tracked content (collected during the lockdown). Likewise, the pandemic may have also broadened the readership of PRR/anti-elite information by bundling those who opposed the pandemic measures—both from the left or the right. Finally, by employing a naturalistic setting, we lost control of potential confounding factors that influence the relations in which we were interested. Thus, we cannot speak of a causal chain in which specific attitudes predict information behaviors.

In sum, we believe that we have brought forward research on political information usage by studying both steps of selectivity in a naturalistic setting. Our findings reveal that selectivity is conditional. It is the country context that shapes the role of the ideological component of people's online information behavior. Thus, we call for future research on this country-context conditionality and for more modesty when trying to generalize findings from experimental settings or one-country studies. Hereby, we suggest that the online

realm fulfills different functions according to a country's openness toward a specific ideology: In countries where a specific ideology is part of the main culture, the Internet is not necessarily a place to go selective whereas in those countries where ideologies are pushed to the margins, the Internet is the place for selective and alternative usage.

Further, we have shown that it is necessary to simultaneously consider the role of involvement and ideology for studying the role of (consonant) information exposure. Finally, we have moved beyond studying selectivity for online political news only and have taken the full breadth of online political information into account. Whereas studies so far have found that only about 2% of tracking material is related to political news consumption (Wojcieszak et al., 2021), in our study this share goes up to about 12% for political information consumption. Theoretically, this implies that political communication research, with its strong focus on (traditional) media, fails to comprehend the breadth of political information engagement and its potential selective usage. In today's high-choice information environment, we have to study the long-tail of online information consumption and combine it with news consumption offline and online.

While the analyses presented here only consider political attitudes and involvement as correlates of information behavior, future research needs to show which degree of PRR exposure is relevant for political opinion formation and which citizens are affected or radicalized.

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